

Implies Audience...

Is it an Ode, Elegy...

What's dead?...

- values, soldiers, way of life?

For the **Union** Dead





Relinquunt Ommia Servare Rem Publicam

“He leaves all else to serve the republic.”

By quoting this inscription, Lowell introduces the theme of noble self-sacrifice.

Poetic Cartography





Mapping the American Mood

**as it regresses from
idealism to despair.**

Poem opens with a childhood memory, the past & present fused

Oxymoron - vastness

the past in decay

The old South Boston Aquarium stands
in a **Sahara of snow** now. Its **broken windows are boarded**.

The bronze weathervane **cod** has **lost half its scales**.

The airy tanks are dry.

Boston in decay?

Once my nose crawled like a snail on the glass;
my hand tingled to burst the bubbles
drifting from the noses of the **crowded, compliant** fish



Opening Stanza

- The opening stanza describes the closed South Boston Aquarium. The simple sentence patterns emphasize a sense of loss and dilapidation. In particular, a list of strong adjectives evoke this melancholy mood; the windows are “broken” and “boarded,” the weathervane’s scales are “lost,” and the fish tanks are “airy” and “dry.” Everything is ruined, broken, and bare.

My hand draws back. I often sign still
for the dark downward and vegetating **kingdom**
of the fish and reptile. One morning last March
I pressed against the new barbed and galvanised

fence on the Boston Common. Behind their cage,
yellow dinosaur steamshovels were grunting as they
cropped up tons of mush and grass
to gouge their underworld garage.



Boston Common



Enjambment: Stanzas 2-3

- When one sentence flows onto another, in this case from one stanza to another.

“new barbed and galvanized // fence on the Boston Common.”

- This image suggests much of the speaker’s attitude toward contemporary life. What is “new” is a particularly ugly and menacing border between people. The “fence” splits the Boston Common, a public area where people usually congregate. Instead of a crowd enjoying the scenery, however, bulldozers dig up earth in order to build a parking garage. The scene is portrayed as savage and hellish, as the bulldozers are metaphorically described as “dinosaur[s]” and the underground garage is deemed an “underworld.” Thus, modern construction tools evoke a prehistoric, animalistic world.

Contemporary Values

Parking spaces luxuriate like civic

sandpiles in the heart of Boston

a girdle of orange, Puritan-pumpkin colored girders

braces the tingling Statehouse,

Representation

shaking over the excavations, as it faces Colonel Shaw

And his bell-cheeked Negro infantry

Idealism

on St. Gaudens' shaking Civil War relief,

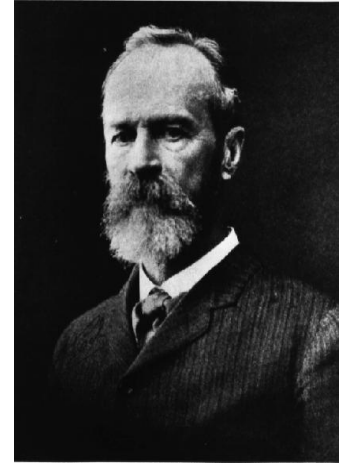
propped by a **plank splint** against the garage's earthquake.

Two months after marching through Boston,
Half of the regiment was dead;
At the dedication,

William James could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe.



William James was a philosopher, author (his most famous book is *The Types of Varieties of Religious Experience*), and member of the distinguished James family. (His brother Henry, the novelist and short story writer, wrote, among other works, *Portrait of a Lady*.) James's comment at the monument's 1897 dedication that he "could almost hear the bronze Negroes breathe" gives a sense of deep appreciation and respect for the slain men's heroism and sacrifice. Yet, a few generations later, "Their monument sticks like a fishbone / in the city's throat." Instead of reverence, the city's attitude toward the soldiers and what they represented has shifted to discomfort. Furthermore, the stern images that Lowell presents of Colonel Shaw suggest Shaw's unease with the public role others claim for him: "he seems to wince at pleasure, / and suffocate for privacy."



Their monument sticks like a fishbone
in the city's throat.

Its Colonel is a lean
as a compass-needle.

He has an angry wrenlike vigilance,
A greyhound's gentle tautness;
he seems to wince at pleasure,
and suffocate for privacy.

representation

Figuratively, in what way is he
out of bounds?

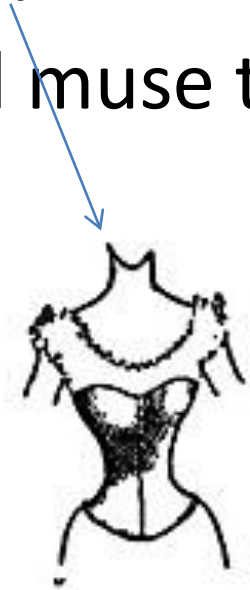
What does this mean?

He is **out of bounds** now. He rejoices in man's lovely,
Peculiar power to choose **life and die** –
when he leads his black soldiers to death,
he cannot bend his back.

On a thousand small town New England greens
The old white churches hold their air
Of sparse, sincere rebellion; frayed flags
Quilt the graveyards of the Grand Army of the Republic


History
recedes

The **stone statutes** of the **abstract** Union Soldier
grow slimmer and younger each year –
wasp-waisted, they doze over muskets
and muse through their sideburns...



What does this stanza mean?

Shift in tone

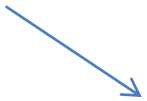
Shaw's father wanted no **monument**
except the **ditch**, 
where his son's body was thrown
and lost with his 'niggers.'

The ditch is nearer.

There are no statues for the last war

On Boylston Street, a commercial photograph
shows Hiroshima boiling

apocalyptic
image



over a Mosler Safe, the 'Rock of Ages'
That survived the blast. Space is nearer.
When I crouch to my television set,
The drained faces of Negro school-children rise like balloons.

Colonel Shaw
is riding on his **bubble**,
he waits
for the blessed break.

The **Aquarium** is gone. Everywhere,
giant **finned** cars nose forward like **fish**;
a **savage servility**
slides by on grease.




The ancient owl's nest must have burned.
Hastily, all alone,
A glistening armadillo left the scene,
rose-flecked, head down, **tail down**,

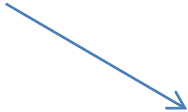
Recall Skunk Hour.

and then a baby rabbit jumped out,
short-eared, to our surprise.
So soft! – a handful of intangible ash
with fixed, **ignited eyes**.

Last three stanzas taken from
E.Bishop's *Armadillo*, a poem about
nuclear holocaust.



Too pretty, **dreamlike mimicry!**
O falling fire and piercing cry
and panic, and a weak mailed fist
clenched ignorant against the sky!



Intertextual link functions to juxtapose
the natural and human worlds.
Natural world surviving, human world
at risk of not surviving.